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Alger Hiss: Liar, Spy, Traitor ...

Anchorman Peter Jennings concluded his elegiac obituary of Alger Hiss on ABC's evening news broadcast Nov. 16 by noting Boris Yeltsin had declared that nothing in KGB files branded the former State Department official a Soviet espionage agent. The problem is that the Russian president never said any such thing.

The source of this misinformation might have been a dispatch by Agence France-Presse claiming Yeltsin "recently said secret KGB files confirmed that Hiss never worked for the Soviets." AFP possibly was confused by a statement supposedly clearing Hiss from the late Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov, military historian and sometime Yeltsin adviser. But Volkogonov recanted by admitting he had not inspected files of Soviet military intelligence, where Whittaker Chambers said he and Hiss were employed.

Other obituaries did not go as far as Jennings, but the prevailing tone suggested that here was an unsolved riddle of the Cold War. Allen Weinstein, whose 1978 book "Perjury" conclusively found Hiss guilty, told me this was "exoneration by obituary."

That is ironic considering the new evidence substantiating Chambers's accusations that he and Hiss were secret agents: from Communist spy Noel Field's confession that Hiss was his key accomplice to the National Security Agency's decryptions identifying Hiss as Soviet agent "Ales."

Why then, 50 years after the event, is there deep-seated reluctance within the American liberal establishment to acknowledge that Hiss was a liar, a spy and a traitor?

The answer is in the corollaries to Hiss's guilt: Joe McCarthy, for all his excesses, had a point. Freshman Rep. Richard Nixon performed a signal service in pursuing Hiss. The New Deal harbored Communists and even traitors in high places.

To accept Hiss's guilt implies an acceptance of Chambers's description of the New Deal (in "Witness," his 1952 account of the Hiss case): "It was a revolution by bookkeeping and lawmaking. In so far as it was successful, the power of politics had replaced the power of business. This is the basic power shift of all the revolutions of our time. . . . Whether the revolutionists prefer to call themselves Fabians, who seek power by the inevitability of gradualism, or Bolsheviks, who seek power by the dictatorship of the proletariat, the struggle is for power."

Chambers wrote that Hiss could not be separated from the New Deal and liberalism. Nixon, to his dying day, believed the dominant political culture never forgave him for uncovering Hiss. Roger Morris, in order to destroy Nixon's credibility in "Richard Milhous Nixon: The Rise of an American Politician" (1991), embraced a conspiracy theory of a plot to frame Hiss.

Liberal historian Walter LaFeber contends, "It was the Hiss trial . . . that triggered the McCarthy era." To McCarthyites, he continues, Hiss became the symbol for an establishment "that had sold the nation out."

Thus, disregarding all new evidence, LaFeber concludes that the question of Hiss's guilt or innocence "is like the argument over who started the Cold War—it's going to go on forever." This stance from a supposedly serious historian of the Cold War links continued defense of Hiss to revisionist analysis of Soviet intentions.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan is one liberal intellectual with no doubts about Hiss's guilt—and a theory about why the best and the brightest betray their country.

In his new book, "Miles to Go: A Personal History of Social Policy," Moynihan notes that the United States suffered through a brutal series of booms and busts between 1890 and 1945, climaxed by the Great Depression and 25 percent unemployment. Since the Employment Act of 1946, there has been stability (reason enough, the senator says, to oppose a balanced budget constitutional amendment). But Hiss and his colleagues had witnessed the failure of capitalism and their own New Deal, and they turned to Moscow.

Moynihan expounded this theory to me the day it was announced that the CIA's Harold Nicholson had been arrested for giving secrets to the Kremlin, as Hiss did. Unlike Hiss and like Aldrich Ames, Nicholson allegedly did it for money, not ideology.

But Alger Hiss's idealistic base for his treason is no reason to persist in unfounded doubts about his guilt. It is surely no reason to confuse matters with manufactured assessments by Boris Yeltsin.

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